

Research Paper

An Overview of the Relationship between Anxiety, Stress, Meaning in Life and Increasing Substance Use in Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between anxiety, stress and meaning in life and increasing adolescent substance use. Substance is a vast issue in our country. Chronic use of any substance can develop a dependency on it and produce psychological and physical problems. Adolescents are more prone to take substances. Substance abuse in adolescents is increasing day by day at an alarming rate in India and is directly affecting cultural norms, the country's intense competitiveness in the job and educational markets, the financial strain on families, and the adolescent population's social support networks at this time of transition. Anxiety and stress are major causes of substance intake behavior. Sometimes, when adolescents are facing any kind of stress or anxiety, they may start taking substances such as smoking, consuming alcohol to reduce their stress but continuous intake of any substance increases the rate, creating dependency on those substances. It leads to increased consumption of drugs. Meaning in life also plays an important role in controlling substance abuse behavior. Meaninglessness can be both antecedent as well as result of substance abuse.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Stress, Meaning in Life, Substance Use in Adolescents*

Anxiety
The most common definition of anxiety is a generalised, unpleasant, vague feeling of unease that is frequently accompanied by autonomic symptoms like headache, perspiration, palpitations, Chest constriction, slight stomach ache, and restlessness, which is manifested by a lack of endurance for prolonged sitting or standing. Anxiety is an altering signal. it cautions of threatening danger and helps someone take action to deal with a threat. Anxiety can also be defined as a reaction to an unknown, internal, ambiguous, or conflicting threat. There are two elements to the anxious feeling such as awareness of the physiological sensation and awareness of feeling nervous or scared. Anxiety can affect the thinking, and perception of the person (Sadock and Sadock 2007).

Stress

Stress is a response to a situation that involves an effectual, evolutionarily conserved and complex system, with several modulations. The initial stage of the stress reaction is the perception of a stressor. The brain enlists a number of neural circuits to protect physiological

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integrity when a condition is seen as a threat.(Ulrich-Lai and Herman,2009). However, different types of stressors require the involvement of different networks. There are two types of stressors, physical and psychological stressors which stimulate various cellular and neuronal networks, leaving the brain with varied cellular and neuronal footprints. (Dayas et. al.,2001). Physical stressors are mostly processed by the brainstem and hypothalamus, and they frequently need an instantaneous systemic reaction that might be regarded as reflexive. (Ulrich-Lai and Herman, 2009). Psychologically uncontrolled and socially threatening stresses are referred to be psychological stressors because they cause both physical and cognitive stress reactions, whereas physical stressors are more likely to cause autonomic stress responses. (Skoluda et al., 2015).

Meaning in Life

The theory of meaning in life (ML) is based in part on Frankl's (1984) proposition that people without an identified life motive can experience an existential crisis, which leads to maladaptive methods such as engaging in addictive behaviours. Frankl's (1984) work alluded to two dimensions of lifestyles that means: the revel in having meaning, and the search to find meaning. Greater current, those two dimensions are Known as “presence of meaning” (PM) and “search for meaning” (SM), respectively (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Each dimension is proposed to noticeably expect behavior in unique ways.

Substance use

Substance can be defined as any psychoactive compound that has potential to create health and social problems. Chronic substance use is referred to as substance abuse which can be understood as the usage of a drug in quantities or ways that endanger oneself or others (Kumar R. 2022). Excessive use of any substance can develop dependency on those substances and produce physical and mental problems.

Adolescence

It is widely known that the adolescence phase can be conceptualized as a stage of transition. Therefore, this phase begins with the onset of puberty and ends when the individual accepts the laws and responsibilities of adulthood. Adolescence is mostly viewed as a quick and extremely intensive period of transition among all life phases, with the exception of childhood. (Achenbach & McConaughy, 1997). This is evident in the area of biological development, where the modifications are observable in both visible and internal manifestations. Additionally, it can be observed in the development of cognitive and psychosocial maturity from childhood to full-fledged adulthood. (Stankovska, Osmani, Grncarovska, & Angelkovska, 2016).

Substance uses in adolescents

As per a survey carried out by an NGO in India, adolescents were the age group at which 63.6% of the patients seeking treatment were initially exposed to drugs. According to research, 13.1% of drug and substance abusers in India are under the age of 20. As per another study done in India between 2013 and 2015, 95.7 percent of the 446 children and adolescents who reported de-addiction were from 16 years to 19 years; 49.5% came from urban areas, while 50.5% did so from rural ones. Out of these children and adolescents, 36.1% were working, 24.4% were not working and 39.5% were students. The results indicated that men participated more than women. In terms of level of education, 5.4% were illiterate, 24% had just completed high school, and 47.5% had completed their matriculation. (Singh, et al 2017).

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Anxiety and stress

Adolescents are extremely impacted by their experiences of stress, depression, and anxiety. Though, while coping with their issues, they may rely on a variety of negative or positive behaviours. Anxiety, sadness, anger, frustration and hopelessness are all made worse by stress. (Goodwin et al., 2004; Byrne & Mazanov, 2002). In a study conducted on 160 adolescents, researchers found a strong correlation between anxiety symptoms and stressful life events. Additionally, medical and family stressful events are intimately related to the symptoms of anxiety. There was a substantial connection between gender and socially stressful situations in life as well as medical stressful life events. As opposed to that, there was a negative correlation between gender and academic stress (Stankovska, Osmani, Grncarovska, & Angelkovska, 2016)

Anxiety and meaning in life

There are many studies which have revealed that there is an association between anxiety and meaning in life, Yek et al., (2017) did a study with the aim to explore the relationship between health anxiety, with the search for meaning in life and the presence of meaning in life. 753 individuals were included. Results suggested that lower health anxiety was associated with higher levels of presence of meaning in life, while higher levels of search for meaning in life seeking were linked to higher levels of health anxiety. Results also indicated an interaction between the search for meaning in life and presence of meaning in life. People with high levels of both the present and the search for significance in life experienced less health anxiety than people with low levels of both the presence and the search for meaning. The finding also revealed a relationship between health anxiety and the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning. A study, conducted by Marcoa and Alonso (2019), investigated the function of meaning in life as a buffer in the association between maladjustment, negative affect, and clinical anxiety in participants with common mental illnesses who were on sick leave. A total of 167 participants were chosen, 115 of whom were women and 52 of whom were men, and all of whom had adjustment, anxiety, and depressive disorders. Researchers discovered that the connection between negative affect or clinical anxiety and general maladjustment to daily life was reduced and buffered by Meaning in life. The findings imply that meaning in life is an important factor in how well people with common mental illnesses adjust while on sick leave.

Anxiety and substance use

There are some studies show that having an anxiety disorder increases the risk of developing a substance use disorder. Those who are suffering from anxiety are more susceptible to substance use and their dependence in the future [Groenman, Janssen, and Oosterlaan (2017), Lopez, Turner, and Saavedra (2005)]. In most of the cases, the initial exposure to illicit drugs turns out in adolescents [Pearson, Janz, and Ali (2013)]. This could promote substance abuse coupled with anxiety symptoms, which can result in adulthood dysfunction. [Goodwin, Fergusson, and Horwood (2004), Riggs, Levin, Green, and Vocci (2008)].

Stress and meaning in life

Stress can be caused by many reasons. For example, when a person is meaningless, he has no motive to carry on his life, he might face stress and due to excessive stress, he can start substance intake. Kheirabadil, Jajarmi1, and Bakhshipoor (2021) conducted a study, with the mediating roles of meaning in life and experiencing avoidance, they conducted structural modeling of stress and substance misuse. 387 students were selected for this study utilizing multistage random cluster sampling. Findings indicated a direct and positive correlation

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between stress and substance abuse when the total effect model was examined. Additionally, it was discovered through the examination of the mediation effect model that experiential avoidance mediates the link between stress and substance misuse in a positive and partial manner. The relationship between stress and substance abuse is negatively and partially mediated by meaning in life. A cross-sectional study was done by Yousaf et al., (2019) with the purpose to explore the relationship between scores of meaning in life and scores of stress in undergraduate students. The sample included 254 undergraduate students. Results revealed that females scored higher on perceived stress than male whereas male scored higher on purpose in life as compared to females. Another finding indicates a significant negative correlation between the two variables. There was found to be a strong correlation between meaning in life and perceived stress. Zhong, Zhang, Bao, and Xu (2019) conducted a study to explore the extent to which meaning in life contributed to the relationship between dispositional mindfulness and psychological symptoms. In this study, 292 patients with gastrointestinal cancer were selected. Results showed that lower psychological symptoms and perceived stress were associated with higher mindfulness. Furthermore, meaning in life mediates the relationship between dispositional mindfulness, perceived stress, and psychological symptoms. Bano (2014) conducted a study with the aim to investigate how meaning in life affects the level of stress and psychological well-being among university students. 560 college students from Pakistan's Quaid-i-Azam University were included in this study. According to the findings, university students who have a high sense of meaning in life tend to be high psychological well-being and are less stressed. The findings of this study also revealed that there were no statistically significant variations in the meaning of life variable between men and women.

Stress and substance use

Stress can be influenced by substance abuse. A study conducted at Jimma University on 329 medical students aimed to quantify the level of stress experienced by medical students and its correlation with substance usage and academic performance. Smoking, alcohol intake, and chewing khat were all substantially correlated with stress. There is also a negative effect on academic performance (Melaku, Mossie, and Negash, 2015). Self-esteem can be a mediating factor between stress and substance abuse among adolescents. Stress and self-esteem are strongly and negatively correlated, similarly with self-esteem. The author discovered a moderately positive association between stress and substance abuse. In some ways, self-esteem mediates the relationship between stress and substance abuse. (Ikechukwu, Siti, Talib, Mofrad, and Abdullah, 2013).

Meaning in life and substance use

There are many authors who have observed in their studies that the feeling of meaningless life among adolescents who managed to avoid being alone, anonymity and despair of a depersonalized, affluent society through substance usage (Frankl 1972, and Shean, & Fechtmann 1971) Frankl propose that adolescent's manifest boredom and apathy as a result of experiential frustration which prosperity breeds by placing too few demands upon them. Spared healthy tension by an under demanding society, the adolescents create unhealthy tension through experimentation with substance. Padelford, (1974) did a study on 416 adolescents, he found a significant negative correlation between substance use and meaning in life. Students with low life purposes were shown to be substantially more likely to use drugs than students with good life purposes.

CONCLUSION

Substance use is a chronic problem in our country. When a person starts taking any substance, he might develop a dependency on it. Chronic use of any substance produces psychopathology. Anxiety and stress are the comorbid conditions of substance use disorder. An anxious or stressful individual starts taking substance to reduce his anxiety or stress. If a person has strong meaning there is great possibility that they may cope better from anxiety and stress. Substance abuse in adolescents is increasing day by day. Adolescents with feelings of life's meaninglessness may escape the loneliness, anonymity and despair of a depersonalized, affluent society through substance usage. A person at the age of adolescence has no meaning in life, might be in stress and due to continued stress, he can start taking substances and develop dependency on substances. If the levels of stress and anxiety is reduced through family, social or professional support there are chances of starting substance use can be decreased to significant level similarly if the addicts somehow realize the meaning in life deaddiction may be initiated comparatively easily and the deaddiction technique may be more effective with low chances of reminiscence.

Future implication

The present study discovered the relationship between anxiety, stress, meaning in life and increasing substance use in adolescence. This study has implications for adolescents, parents, academics, psychology, vocational counsellor and rehabilitation counsellor. Adolescents have low coping skills and they start searching for an easy way to relieve their stress and consequently start taking substances. There should be trained psychologists for school and college students that can provide facilities and opportunities to learn stress management techniques, so they can cope with daily living stressors. It is essential for colleges or institutes to organize mental health workshops. It will help students to make an aim in their life. In future more challenges will come in front of college students, so it is necessary to make our country's adolescents emotionally and mentally stronger, so they can face the coming challenges positively.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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